English Language Teaching in the Postmethod Era

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Abstract

The notion that the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry has been in a postmethod era over the last thirty years, is one that has received considerable academic acclaim. In a departure from teachers' dependency on prescribed teaching methods, the postmethod asserts that practitioners should instead be encouraged to "construct classroom-orientated theories of practice" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 29). Having worked in the ELT industry for the last ten years, this article seeks to bridge the gap between theory and reality, by exploring the validity of the concept of the postmethod by contextualising it within my own experiences of working in the field. Are ELT methods, as the postmethod would indicate, redundant? And if not, to what degree do methods influence the practices of an ELT practitioner?

Introduction

When in the mid-1980s, H.H Stern (1985) wrote of the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry's "century-old obsession" (p. 285), he was referring to what he perceived to be the profession's misguided preoccupation with teaching methods and its ultimate quest to find the best one. Stern was not alone in this view; Pennycook (1989), Prabhu (1990) and Richards (1990) were just some of the myriad of academics who put voice to the growing criticism of methods as being viable constructs on which to base teaching practice. The start of a major trend in language teaching had supposedly begun—the move from method-based pedagogy to postmethod pedagogy.

First coined by Kumaravadivelu (1994), the term *postmethod condition* put name to an alternative solution to dependency on knowledge-orientated methods, calling for the need to "empower practitioners to construct classroom-orientated theories of practice" (p. 29). Rather than practitioners, therefore, being dependent on a method's prescribed practices, they should instead be encouraged to develop and "adapt their approach in accordance with local, contextual factors, while at the same time being guided by a number of macrostrategies" (Thornbury, 2009).

Having worked in the ELT industry for nearly ten years in a number of different of countries, educational settings and various teaching / management roles, the news that I have done so in the time of a postmethod era comes as an intriguing revelation. Like many practitioners, such as those interviewed by Bell (2007), I would describe my teaching method as being an eclectic mix of techniques and practices, some of which adhere to the principles of well-known methods such as the Communicative Approach (CA), and others which I have developed and refined myself. With this in mind, in some respects the postmethod era strikes me as being a plausible notion, such as its recognition of the limitations of well-known methods and the need for teachers to move beyond them. In other respects however, I am more dubious; how for instance, if we reject the notion of methods, as the name postmethod would seem to suggest, can I and my fellow practitioners be confident that we are aiding our students' language learning development in the most effective manner? Furthermore, I am left questioning if the notion of a postmethod era implies that teachers should have the total freedom to do what they want.

In light of the debate around the validity of the concept of the postmethod, this article seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. Are ELT methods, as the postmethod would indicate, redundant?
2 And if not, to what degree do methods influence the practices of an ELT practitioner?

In order to address the above questions, this article will begin by exploring the concept of the postmethod era. Initially, I shall define how the term *method* is used in this context. Having addressed the aforementioned word's multi-faceted scope, I shall then discuss the evolution and meaning of the term postmethod and discuss some of the most notable debates surrounding it. Following this, I shall explore the article's key research questions by framing the postmethod in the context of my own experiences over the ten years that I have worked as a teacher and academic manager in Europe and Japan.

Literature Review

Methods

The difficulty in defining the term method was well summarised by Pennycook (1989) when he wrote that "there is little agreement and coherence to the terms used" (p. 602). Of the many interpretations to emerge, Anthony's (1963) definition is noted as being one the most credible in laying the foundations of the term, citing methods as being one part of three hierarchical components, alongside *approaches* and *techniques*. The relationship between the three terms is such that "Techniques carry out a method which is consistent with an approach" (Anthony, 1963, p. 63). An approach is thought of as assumptions made about the nature of language teaching and learning, which informs the method, "the overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material" (Anthony, 1963, p. 68). Finally, technique is the practical realisation of the method in the classroom. Anthony's definition overtime has been altered and refined in response to "widespread dissatisfaction with it" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 85), with notable reconfigurations including Richard and Roger's (2001) approach. It is perhaps not surprising that like academic scholars, practising ELT teachers themselves also vary in their perception of what a method is (Bell, 2007).

For the sake of clarity, in the following paper the word method will refer to Thornbury's (2006) definition of it being "a system for the teaching of a language that is based either on a particular theory of language or on a particular theory of learning, or (usually) on both" (p. 131). Whilst some writers like Anthony (1963) distinguish between method and approach, I shall use the two terms interchangeably to mean the same thing. Both

of these terms should not be confused with *methodology,* which is taken to mean actual practices that teachers use in the classroom, irrespective of the method they are based on.

Grammar Translation, the Direct Method and CA are widely acknowledged as being examples of methods that at some point in time have had popular acclaim and application in the ELT industry, with estimates putting the number of methods of this type as being somewhere between 10-20 (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers 2001).Whilst Traditionalist perspectives note that "there has been a series of language teaching methods over the years, each being succeeded by a better one until we reach the present" (Pennycook, 1989, p. 597), others deem that rather than viewing certain methods as being better than others, all of them hold value to modern-day teachers (Lowe, 2003).

The Postmethod Era

The notion of a postmethod era in ELT emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to a growing critique of the shortcomings of methods. Two particular lines of argument can be traced as being influential in shaping Kumaravadivelu's (1994) conception of the term postmethod condition. The first of these challenged the ELT industries supposed preoccupation with the search for a best method; Prabhu (1990) was a notable proponent of this view who expressed that the success of a method was context dependent, and that each one could be deemed to plausible in certain situations. Elaborating on this, Prabhu (1990) spoke of the importance of the role of teachers' "sense of plausibility" (p. 172); this was the idea that teachers should have an active role in forming and choosing methodologies that work best for the learners they have in front of them, as opposed to mechanically following one the principles of one particular method. Pennycook (1989) on the other hand, sought to challenge the notion of methods on the basis that the theories on which they are formed are not objective but rather conceptualized with an ideological and biased motivation in mind.

Many other writers voiced their discontent with the term method. Prominent critics who echoed and expanded upon the arguments made by Prabhu and Pennycook included Allwright (1991), who asserted that methods encouraged teachers to become complacent, and Richards (1990), who stated that it was actually impossible in reality for a teacher to adhere to the principles of a particular method. Whilst some critics of methods did not reject them as being completely redundant constructs (Block, 2001), others such as Nunan (1989), Brown (2002) and Allwright who spoke of the "death of the method" (as cited in Hall, 2011, p. 100), took the more radical view that the term method no longer had any relevance or impact whatsoever.

As criticism mounted, alternatives to methods such as *eclecticism* emerged, although it was Kumaravadivelu's (1994) conception of the notion of postmethod condition that received the most academic attention; presented as a condition that necessitates the industry to completely rethink the relationship between theory and practice, the postmethod calls for the promotion of teacher autonomy with the view to "enabling and empowering teachers to theorize from practice and practice what they have theorized" (1994, p. 30). This is not to say that teachers should seek to find and define their own methods, but rather that through critical reflection, experience and a willingness to use and adapt methodologies to the context that they are in, that this should lead to the actualization of informed effective classroom teaching. Postmethod pedagogy is not intended to be viewed as a type of method but as "an alternative to method" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 32).

The postmethod condition does not suggest that teachers such as myself are free to do whatever we want without any guide. Rather, a practitioner's efforts to teach effective lessons should be an informed one. This is achieved through consultation of three intertwining, guiding principles which seek to conceptualise postmethod pedagogy: the *parameter of particularity*, the *parameter of practicality*, and the *parameter of possibility* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The parameter of particularity asserts that for pedagogy to be most effective it should be sensitive to the unique local context in which is it being applied. The second parameter, that of practicality, calls for teachers to seek to find ways to help their students learn based on their own experiences and knowledge, rather than looking to supposed experts for the answers. Finally, the parameter of possibility is concerned with the critical view of pedagogy that language teaching should consider. This parameter calls for teachers to consider the role that language learning can have in the process of social transformation.

In addition to the three aforementioned parameters, several frameworks have been developed to further guide postmethod pedagogy and help teachers to "develop the knowledge, skill, attitude, and autonomy necessary to devise for themselves a systematic, coherent and relevant personal theory of practice'" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 40). Of the many ELT postmethod frameworks that have emerged, two stand out as being particularly notable; the first of these is Kumaravadivelu's *Macro-Strategic* framework which outlines ten principles for teachers to consider. Examples include the need for teachers to "maximise learning opportunities," "facilitate negotiated interaction" and "contextualize linguistic input" (1994). Kumaravadivelu (1994) describes all of the macro-strategies as being "theory neutral

as well as method neutral" (p. 32), that is to say the strategies are not constricted or underpinned by one particular theory or method.

The second framework of note is Stern's (1992) *Three-Dimensional* model which outlines three principles for teachers to follow: *the intra-lingual and cross-lingual dimension*, *the analytic-experiential dimension* and *the explicit-implicit dimension*. In a similar vein to Kumaravadivelu's Macro-strategic framework, Stern does not intend for these principles to be rigid and dictatorial, rather ones that teachers can follow and adapt to the degree necessary to meet the unique needs of the students they have in front of them. Where as a method might promote explicit grammar teaching for instance, Stern's explicit-implicit dimension leaves the decision in the hands of the teacher recognising that in some instances "language can be much too complex to be fully described" (1992, p. 339).

Attitudes to the Postmethod Era

Despite the significant amount of academic support that the concept of the postmethod era has received over the last twenty years, it has not been without its critics. One particularly prominent line of argument challenges many of the denunciations that the postmethod makes about methods, notably that far from being dead, methods are still of value to teachers (Block, 2001; Adamson, 2004; Thornbury, 2009). Bell's (2007) study for instance, concluded that teachers found methods useful because they helped them to decide which approaches to adopt themselves. In essence, methods provide teachers with a pool of options from which they are free to choose those most appropriate to the context in which they are working. Postmethod proponents therefore are misguided in their assumption that methods act as restrictive and controlling mechanisms; teachers do recognise that methods have their limitations and most develop a personal approach that is responsive to their own attitudes and the circumstances in which they are working in.

Furthermore, some writers reject Kumaravadivelu's suggestion that postmethod pedagogy is an alternative to methods, claiming that far from being different to a method, it is in reality essentially the same thing, or rather not that different (Lui, 1995; Swan, 2009). Ur (2013), for instance, questions how different the frameworks proposed by postmethod proponents are to other methods, claiming "a set of macro-strategies looks suspiciously like a method themselves" (p. 469); postmethod frameworks, therefore, fall foul of the very criticisms that it makes about methods, namely that they serve to restrict the role of the teacher and that they promote the implementation of certain learning conditions over others.

In addition to those who criticise many of the assertions that the postmethod makes about the supposed limitations and redundancy of methods, others question the feasibility of the actual realisation of postmethod pedagogy. With teacher autonomy lying at the very heart of its ethos, postmethod pedagogy seems to ignore the myriad of constraints which restrict practitioners such as myself from teaching as we wish (Akbari, 2008; Crookes, 2009). Accordingly, Hall (2011) states that "teachers are not completely free to pick and choose how they teach; they are bound in by social convention, learners' expectations and school and ministry policies about how to teach and what methodology to follow" (p. 101). Course books, tests and limited school facilities are further examples of just some of the factors that may impede practitioners from teaching in a manner that they wish. Whilst Kumaravadivelu has briefly discussed the role of the course book in some of his work, at no point has he directly advised teachers as to how they can use postmethod pedagogy in tandem with the restrictions that published materials impose (Akbari, 2008).

Moreover, in emphasising the importance of the teacher and the crucial role of their sense of plausibility, the postmethod can be criticised in that it assumes that all teachers actually want to or are willing to take an active role in developing their own methodologies. Low pay, limited time and a lack of confidence or experience are just some of the reasons that teacher might not feel able to or keen to develop their sense of plausibility (Akbari, 2008). Essentially, the postmethod model of teaching might not work for everyone as not every practitioner is realistically prepared to assume the enhanced teacher role that postmethod pedagogy appears to promote.

Criticisms notwithstanding, some in the field have argued that postmethod and method both have their merits. Bell (2003), for instance, suggests that the two should be viewed as having a "dialectical relationship" (p. 332); this is to say that the positives of each weigh out the negatives of the other and a consideration of each therefore could prove invaluable in the construction of effective classroom practices. In contrast to this, others have sought to present an alternative to both methods and the postmethod; Ur (2013) proposes that teachers need to focus on developing their own "Situated methodologies" (p. 470); these, unlike methods, are based on a number of considerations beyond general theories of learning such as classroom dynamics and student motivation, and seek to address the question, "How are my students likely to work best?"

The Impact and Implications of the Postmethod: Analysing in Context

Although the issues which were addressed in the previous section are by no means exhaustive, they do serve to highlight some of the key debates surrounding the validity of the postmethod era and postmethod pedagogy. Whilst there has clearly been a lot of debate amongst academics about the plausibility and validity of the postmethod era, it has long been acknowledged that a gap exists between theory and the reality of the classroom (Ellis, 2009; Waters, 2012). For these debates to be substantiated and meaningful, therefore, they need to be grounded in context. With this in mind, I shall now consider the extent to which, if any, my ten years of experience of working in the ELT field has been influenced by postmethod ideas. For clarification, the first six years of my ELT experience were spent working in language academies in the UK and Spain, initially as a teacher and then as an academic manager. The latter four years have been spent working at Universities in Japan both as a teacher and curriculum writer.

To what extent is there truth the postmethod's assertion that methods are dead? Focusing initially on the first six years of my ELT experience, an inspection of the websites of the six schools that I worked for during this period, would indicate that far from methods being dead, they were in fact at the forefront of each academies' teaching ethos. Each of the websites promoted a remarkably similar approach to teaching, claiming that their teachers use methods which are eclectic, yet which place emphasis on CA (International House Madrid, 2014; Oxford International English, 2014). Oxford International English's website, for instance, stated that "our team of experienced and enthusiastic teachers primarily take a Communicative Approach in class." In my experience whilst working as a teacher, this message is one that certainly filters down to the teachers. I have been encouraged via observation feedback and professional development seminars to adopt methodologies that adhered to the principles of CA (also referred to as Communicative Language Teaching) and Task Based Learning (TBL), and the notion that these were two of the most effective methods of teaching was one instilled in me from my initial teacher training course – the CELTA. When working in the role of Academic Manager, I too encouraged other teachers to adopt a similar approach.

With the above in mind, the idea that we are in a postmethod era is one that, with reference to my own context, can, in some respects, be challenged. This can be done so firstly on the basis that methods, as stated by Block (2001) and Lui (1995), are in fact not dead. Whilst teachers do not in reality rigidly stick to the principles of one particular method

(despite some of them perhaps thinking that they do due to the promotion of one approach in their institute), popular approaches such as CA and TBL acted as tangible and accessible sources of reference and inspiration for both new and established teachers alike, providing a helpful foundation on which to build upon. This is a view summarised by Adamson (2004), who wrote that "methods are still useful props for teachers in constructing their own pedagogy" (p. 617). Secondly, whether or not teachers move beyond methods is a by-product of the postmethod era is debatable. Having worked in the ELT industry for ten years I do not have the benefit of being able to compare teaching approaches now to those before the 1990s, when the era in question supposedly began. It is my feeling that this is something that teachers have always done and henceforth rather than represent a new era, the postmethod perhaps simply represents a backdrop to old arguments (Bell, 2007).

The aforementioned points out, postmethod proponents do raise valid concerns about the two methods that are widely promoted in the context in question: CA and TBL. It is suggested that the promotion and popularity of CA and TBL serves to enforce the view that Western approaches to learning are more effective than non-Western approaches (Pennycook, 1989); in view of this Richards (1984) spoke of the "secret life of methods" (p. 7), by which he was referring to the control that US and UK based publishers have over influencing what teachers perceive to be the most appropriate methods of teaching. Whilst this certainly seems to be a plausible critique of methods, I would argue that it is not something of particular concern to teachers. As mentioned above, I do not believe that methods control what teachers do, but rather help guide them. CA and TBL offer broad frameworks which are interpreted in many different ways. Importantly, therefore, as noted by Bell (2003), methods play a crucial role in helping to unify teachers, which goes some way to encouraging them to have confidence in what they are doing in the classroom. Where postmethod concerns about the favourable treatment by many educational institutes towards certain methods could be put to credible use, is in encouraging institutes of these types to expand teachers' knowledge of the many different methods that they have at their disposal. Not only would this serve to present them with an even wider range of principles with which they can consult, but it could also help them to remove the mind-set that CA, for instance, are better than others.

Although I have argued that the postmethod should be discredited on the basis that it rejects methods, an arguably stronger charge against the postmethod is in its ignorance of the role of the course book. Throughout the ten years that I have spent working as in the ELT field I have become accustomed to using published materials; more often than not the educational institutes I have worked for have selected course books as the basis of syllabuses

for their lessons, with further supplementary materials often available in abundance. At Asia University, for instance, where I currently work in the role of Visiting Faculty Member (VFM), Cambridge University Press's *Four Corners* textbook series and Cengage's *Pathways* series, are stipulated by the department as respectively being the core course books for freshman English (FE) classes and sophomore classes. Each textbook unit presents the teacher with a ready-made framework for a lesson, an invaluable asset to both new teachers and experienced teachers alike whose planning time can be limited. Whilst I, like many teachers, recognise that if we are to meet the particular needs of our students effectively then we should refrain from following the course book rigidly, the provision of a context, integrated skill work, ideas for warmers, controlled/freer grammar and vocabulary practice activities, provides an attractive basis on which to build a lesson. It could be suggested, therefore, that the method and methodologies that a teacher adopts are governed in large not by their own views but by those laid out by text books and their accompanying procedural guides (Akbari, 2008; Thornbury, 2009).

Therein lies the question, consequentially, that if course books are so influential in informing many ELT teacher's lessons, is this a reflection of the limited impact that postmethod ideology has had at grass-roots level in the classroom? Although not all course books openly subscribe to a well-known method, many of them as noted by Thornbury (2009), base their activities on the principles of the CA. The *Four Corners* (Richards and Bohlke, 2019) textbook series' blurb, for instance, describes its course book as being based on "communicative methodology." Whilst teachers will more than likely adapt course books like *Four Corners*, it seems doubtful that they can escape the imposed views and theories on which they have been designed. Akbari's (2008) suggestion therefore that "the concept of method has not been replaced by the concept of postmethod but rather by an era of textbook-defined practice" (p. 647) seems to me to be a very plausible one.

On a similar note to course books, tests present another challenge to the actualisation of postmethod ideas. In each and every educational institute that I have worked in, both in Europe and Japan, the students, regardless of their age, level or length of course, have been tested in some form. Tests range in their purpose from short weekly progress indicators to higher-stake examinations which students require for their job or University entry, such as TOEIC, IELTs or Cambridge exams like KET, PET and FCE. At the Centre for English Language Teaching (CELE) at Asia University, for instance, all international relation (IR) and multicultural communication (MC) freshman English students must take TOEIC in July of their freshman year. VFM's teaching these classes therefore spend two of their four

weekly classes with these students teaching TOEIC exam skills. Regardless of the purpose, teachers seem to be acutely aware of the importance of helping their students to pass exams. Not only does this help students to feel confident that they are making progress, but it also helps the teacher to feel that they are doing a good job. Tests therefore, may limit and restrict what teachers can do in the classroom, making postmethod suggestions that teachers should develop their own practices, far from straight forward.

Despite having criticised the postmethod for dismissing methods and ignoring the role of the course book, I do acknowledge that one of its strengths is in its recognition and encouragement of the need for teachers to move beyond methods. No one method can claim to meet the needs of all students. Every class presents the teacher with a unique set of learners, complete with different cultural backgrounds, ages, motivations, abilities, expectations and learning styles. Far from applying the same rigid approach in each case therefore, teachers should be encouraged to develop and apply the methodologies that they deem to be most suitable for the learners they have in front of them. With reference to my own context, it is clear to see that teachers do recognise that no one method is the best approach for every single class. As mentioned earlier, whilst many teachers might state that they adhere to CA or TBL, in reality they adopt numerous other methodologies which adhere to well-known methods or which they have developed themselves, even if they do not realise it. Lowe's (2003) description of the "modern integrated language teacher" (p. 6), suitably captures the essence of what most teachers do.

In relation to the above, where postmethod pedagogy deserves particular credit is in its attempt to produce guidelines which encourage teachers to develop context sensitive teaching approaches. Whilst I have never personally come across any of the frameworks or macrostrategies that postmethod proponents have formalised, I believe they have the potential to be utilised by teacher trainers to the effect of encouraging teachers to feel confident in exploring different methodologies. Kumaravadivelu's (1994) ten macrostrategies for instance could be integrated in to initial teacher training programmes such as the CELTA, so as to encourage teachers from the very beginning to seek to develop their own approaches. This is not to say that they should be presented as being better than methods, but rather that they can be used in unison with them. They could also serve as a useful basis for professional development seminars.

That said, as Akabri (2008, p. 650) suggests, postmethod pedagogical frameworks need to be developed so as to incorporate the views of practising teachers, rather than just be theory based. The language used in Kumaravadivelu's (1994) ten macrostrategies is relatively

complex and I cannot imagine the majority of teachers, including myself, would find them easy to digest nor be willing to engage with them for this reason. Perhaps, however, if they were reformulated so as to give practical classroom advice, they could be more accessible and of greater value to teachers. In addition to this, postmethod theories should seek to readdress the emphasis which they place on encouraging teachers to practise critical pedagogy. In view of the fact that many teachers do not want to or are unable to assume the enhanced role that the postmethod expects them to, postmethod frameworks would do right to consider how they can adapt so as to appeal to all types of teachers.

Conclusion

Whilst the idea that the ELT industry has been in a postmethod era over the last thirty years is one that has received considerable academic acclaim, I would argue that this does not reflect reality. Rather than be viewed as a movement beyond methods, I believe the ideas behind the postmethod era equate to little more than what teachers have always done, namely, to develop a method that best suits their own context and beliefs. Thus, we are not in a new era.

In its criticism of the shortfalls of methods, postmethod proponents place an over emphasis on the role that methods have played in influencing and guiding classroom teachers. Certainly, in the educational institutions I have worked in, both as a teacher and ELT manager in Europe and Japan, popular methods are not rigorously or consciously adhered to; what I found to be considerably more influential in informing teachers' choice of methodologies are course books and exams. This said, the principles behind methods/approaches such as CA and TBL are ones that many teachers are aware of and would claim to inform or describe in some part their method of teaching. For this reason, methods should not be rejected but rather viewed as useful frames of reference for labelling aspects of teachers own practice, which can be addressed and used in professional development seminars and observations etc.

This is not to say, however, that the notion postmethod should be completely disregarded. I do think that some of the ideas that its proponents have raised are credible, particularly in that they seek to encourage and promote the role of the teacher to develop their own methods, informed in part by their own experiences, views and situations in which they work. Whilst this is not an alien concept to many teachers, I am in agreement with Akbari's (2008) view that the "postmethod must become more responsible and practical to be able to

win the trust of practitioners" (p. 641). The development of a professional development programme and/or practical framework of guidance could help to formalise this notion for teachers. It would also be recommendable that rather than label these developments under the title of postmethod, that the industry considers an alternative, a less charged name.

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